



Cut the Military Budget
Article in *The Nation*
By Congressman Barney Frank
March 2, 2009

I am a great believer in freedom of expression and am proud of those times when I have been one of a few members of Congress to oppose censorship. I still hold close to an absolutist position, but I have been tempted recently to make an exception, not by banning speech but by requiring it. I would be very happy if there was some way to make it a misdemeanor for people to talk about reducing the budget deficit without including a recommendation that we substantially cut military spending.

Sadly, self-described centrist and even liberal organizations often talk about the need to curtail deficits by cutting Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other programs that have a benign social purpose, but they fail to talk about one area where substantial budget reductions would have the doubly beneficial effect of cutting the deficit and diminishing expenditures that often do more harm than good. Obviously people should be concerned about the \$700 billion Congress voted for this past fall to deal with the credit crisis. But even if none of that money were to be paid back--and most of it will be--it would involve a smaller drain on taxpayer dollars than the Iraq War will have cost us by the time it is concluded, and it is roughly equivalent to the \$651 billion we will spend on all defense in this fiscal year.

When I am challenged by people--not all of them conservative--who tell me that they agree, for example, that we should enact comprehensive universal healthcare but wonder how to pay for it, my answer is that I do not know immediately where to get the funding but I know whom I should ask. I was in Congress on September 10, 2001, and I know there was no money in the budget at that time for a war in Iraq. So my answer is that I will go to the people who found the money for that war and ask them if they could find some for healthcare.

It is particularly inexplicable that so many self-styled moderates ignore the extraordinary increase in military spending. After all, George W. Bush himself has acknowledged its importance. As the December 20 *Wall Street Journal* notes, "The president remains adamant his budget troubles were the result of a ramp-up in defense spending." Bush then ends this rare burst of intellectual honesty by blaming all this "ramp-up" on the need to fight the war in Iraq.

Current plans call for us not only to spend hundreds of billions more in Iraq but to continue to spend even more over the next few years producing new weapons that might

have been useful against the Soviet Union. Many of these weapons are technological marvels, but they have a central flaw: no conceivable enemy. It ought to be a requirement in spending all this money for a weapon that there be some need for it. In some cases we are developing weapons--in part because of nothing more than momentum--that lack not only a current military need but even a plausible use in any foreseeable future.

It is possible to debate how strong America should be militarily in relation to the rest of the world. But that is not a debate that needs to be entered into to reduce the military budget by a large amount. If, beginning one year from now, we were to cut military spending by 25 percent from its projected levels, we would still be immeasurably stronger than any combination of nations with whom we might be engaged.

Implicitly, some advocates of continued largesse for the Pentagon concede that the case cannot be made fully in terms of our need to be safe from physical attack. Ironically--even hypocritically, since many of those who make the case are in other contexts anti-government spending conservatives--they argue for a kind of weaponized Keynesianism that says military spending is important because it provides jobs and boosts the economy. Spending on military hardware does produce some jobs, but it is one of the most inefficient ways to deploy public funds to stimulate the economy. When I asked him years ago what he thought about military spending as stimulus, Alan Greenspan, to his credit, noted that from an economic standpoint military spending was like insurance: if necessary to meet its primary need, it had to be done, but it was not good for the economy; and to the extent that it could be reduced, the economy would benefit.

The math is compelling: if we do not make reductions approximating 25 percent of the military budget starting fairly soon, it will be impossible to continue to fund an adequate level of domestic activity even with a repeal of Bush's tax cuts for the very wealthy.

I am working with a variety of thoughtful analysts to show how we can make very substantial cuts in the military budget without in any way diminishing the security we need. I do not think it will be hard to make it clear to Americans that their well-being is far more endangered by a proposal for substantial reductions in Medicare, Social Security or other important domestic areas than it would be by canceling weapons systems that have no justification from any threat we are likely to face.

So those organizations, editorial boards and individuals who talk about the need for fiscal responsibility should be challenged to begin with the area where our spending has been the most irresponsible and has produced the least good for the dollars expended--our military budget. Both parties have for too long indulged the implicit notion that military spending is somehow irrelevant to reducing the deficit and have resisted applying to military spending the standards of efficiency that are applied to other programs. If we do not reduce the military budget, either we accustom ourselves to unending and increasing budget deficits, or we do severe harm to our ability to improve the quality of our lives through sensible public policy.